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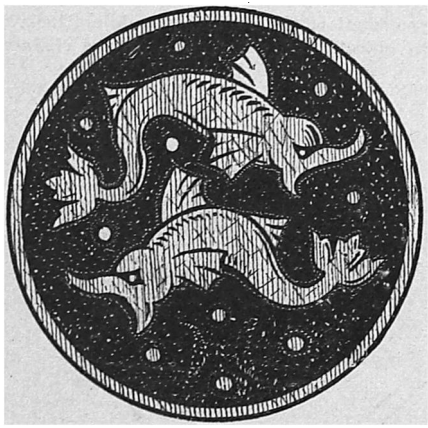


## NATURE IN ART.

BY EDWARD HULME, F.L.S., F.S.A.

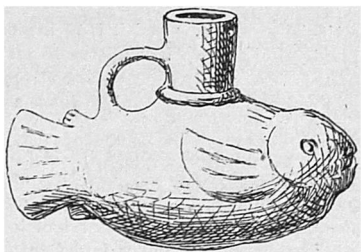
A SERIES OF ARTICLES—NUMBER FOUR.

EXCEPT in the higher form of decoration, floral forms are preferable to those derived from animals or man, and this is in an especial degree the case where a continued repetition of the higher forms, as in the long avenues of sphinx that led to some great temple or tomb in Egypt, or the figures that stand like the winged bulls of Nineveh, erect and in dignified repose. "as sentinels guarding the entrance of the palace of the king; while a still more striking example, because the forms are nobler, will be seen in the Erechtheum at Athens where stately female figures bear on their heads a portion of the temple, and take the place of the columns. It is essential that in such cases the expression should be tranquil and the figure in repose, any



suggestion of restraint or weariness becomes at once unpleasant. In the very highest form of design, animals and the human figure are fully admirable. In the pediment of the Parthenon, for example, each figure was a work of fine art, a noble example of the sculptor's power, yet their arrangement was purely decorative, their aim was as distinctly the adornment of the building as was any carved capitals or moldings.

Though all departments of organic nature have from time to time been laid under contribution in the service of design, the animal kingdom has nevertheless been far less employed than the vegetable. Several reasons suggest themselves to the mind why this should be so. The very fact of animals being far higher in the scale of creation than any merely vegetable growths, in itself unfits them for many positions where some ornamental treatment is desired. The symmetrical balance that is often advisable in a decorative treatment is much more rapidly obtainable by the use of some plant form, than by the employment of any higher means, for the eye that is not offended by seeing a symmetrical grouping of buttercups or maple leaves, would feel a certain sense of incongruity in seeing animals, creatures having volition, placed with like rigidity and formality of balance. It is, therefore, on this account that animals or human figures can most suitably be employed in the highest class of design, as in that the merely mechanical symmetry is replaced by a general balance of the parts. In the pediment of the Parthenon, for example, the groups on either side have a general balance but there is no mere repetition of action or position. The repetition of forms that is so marked a feature in work produced under the influence of machinery is also greatly against the use of these higher forms; for while one's inherent art instinct is not greatly perturbed by the formal repetition of some pleasing floral form, incongruity is again felt when some animal, even low in the scale of life, an animal endowed with the power of motion, and able to throw itself into almost any number of varied positions, and expressing so many various emotions, is mechanically repeated over a surface, so that we get fifty similar butterflies in a wall paper, all descending at the same angle on fifty similar blossoms. In another design we get, perhaps, fifty stags all tripping with the same measured gait, all advancing with the right leg raised in the air, with a perfection of discipline that suggests the monotonous drill of the barrack-yard rather than the glorious freedom of the ferny glades of the forest or the wide ex-



ANCIENT PERUVIAN

ppanse of purple moorland. Animal forms, therefore, are more commonly found in ancient and mediæval art than in that of modern times, the days of machinery, since in those the individual fancies and tastes of the designer had far freer scope than is now ordinarily the case. An illustration of the evil of rigid repetition, so emphatic and so apropos has recently come under our notice that we cannot forbear to quote it. The case in question was a very cheap wall paper: the whole surface was cut up into a series of similar rectangular spaces, and these were made to represent gilt picture frames in juxta-position. In each of these sham frames was a picture—a Chinese family drinking tea. The rude and crude pictorial representation was in any case an offence on all good taste, but when one in every direction saw those Celestials gathered together in fac-simile to drink the national beverage with so fixed a unity of purpose, the effect was ridiculous in the extreme. Could we but bind up a yard or two of this paper with our remarks there would, we feel sure, be little need for us to dwell any further on the unfitness of these higher forms for a merely mechanical repetition.

The question as to how far a direct copy of nature is permissible in decorative art is a further complication of the difficulty that attends the successful introduction of animal forms, since a conventional treatment of the higher forms would not always so readily satisfy the eye as it does in the lower forms, while a mere transcript of nature, beautiful or clever as it may be in itself, would often be offensive to all true art requirements, as, for example, the elaborately counterfeited salmon of earthenware that conceals within its recesses the pickled remains of the real thing, or the skillfully simulated but altogether objectionable hen



that on some breakfast tables covers the eggs that the lowly original has contributed to the family meal.

Animal forms in the ornament of the past will ordinarily be found to owe their introduction either to their connection with some mythological association, as in much of the art of ancient times; to some symbolic meaning that has been attributed to them, as in many examples to be met with in early Christian art; or to the requirements of heraldry, as illustrated by numerous examples in mediæval and modern days. The language of heraldry was generally as symbolic, at least in the earlier times, as that of religion, the two might, therefore, be very conveniently classed together here as one influence.

The mythologic and the symbolic may to some extent be blended together, too, as it is often the same influence, the religious, that is at the root of both. In practice, we naturally class as myths many of the beliefs of the Assyrians, Greeks, or Romans, since they appeal but little to us, regarding only as symbols those forms that are to us symbolic. The eagle of Jove was nevertheless as true a symbol to the Greek or Roman, as was the eagle of St. John to the man who carved or painted in mediæval days. The wolf of the Capitol, the chimera, or the hydra, pointed to the favoring interposition of gods and demi-gods to these followers of an old creed, no less than the various forms that, in like manner and with similar intent, convey to us the sense of an over-ruling power.

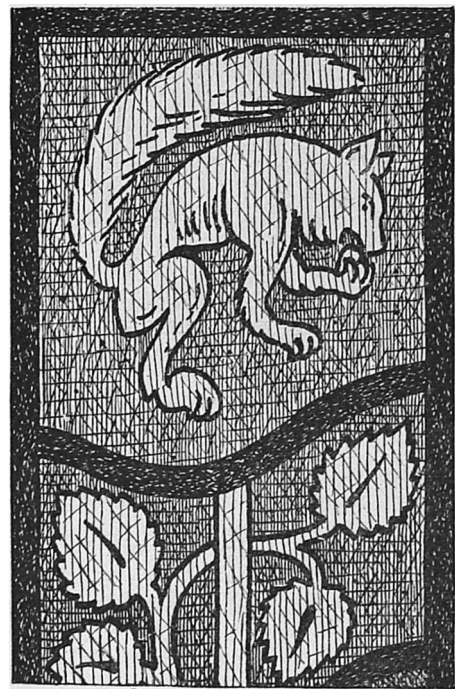
Symbolism is the employment of some positive and visible form as the equivalent of some other thing that is ordinarily incapable of direct representation, as, for instance, fidelity or nationality. The lion of England is as truly a symbol as the lion of St. Mark, and the eagle of America as veritably symbolic as the bird of Jove.

Animal forms are ordinarily found either in the works of those peoples whose art-level is somewhat low—in which case the forms are generally as

nearly naturalistic as imperfect forms and knowledge would permit, as in the ancient Peruvian vase we figure from an example in the British Museum



—or else they are met with under the more or less conventional guise that, in a higher type, aims rather at a symbol of the inner life than of the mere outward form. Hence it is rather the cunning of the fox in this latter case that guides the choice, than the delight in its lithe suppleness of bodily form, the greed and rapacity of the wolf, the gluttony of the pig, rather than an appreciation of the mere awkward appearance of these creatures that has led to their introduction. Our readers will readily recall many other such examples in illustration of the feeling that has thus often guided the choice. Of course, when the inner meaning is the guiding principle, and not the admiration of the outer form, this outer form in which the significance is wrapped often becomes very conventional in character. Many of the mediæval lions, for example, are very wide departures from the actual facts of the case, and in some cases are even winged. We present an illustration of one of these winged lions, the symbol of St. Mark. Its semi-human countenance and spreading pinions are certainly wide departures from the natural form, nor of course does the lion of South Africa evince any interest in manuscripts or walk about in a nimbus. In another of our figures we see a very good illustration of the symbolic meaning attached to the wolf and the fox: it is from a piece of gothic carving. The intention is evidently sarcastic, for we see the wolf in the robes of a bishop addressing his flock from the pulpit, while the fox kneels before him and bears the pastoral staff.



In the middle ages a great use of animal forms may be found in ornaments, and in many works of the decorated or fourteenth century period they are very naturalistically treated, and were probably introduced from the delight of the painter or sculptor in their beauty of form, or from the interest felt in them; nevertheless, we cannot ourselves but feel that such motive is exceptional in the range of art. In one of the capitals at York we remember to have noticed that, in the midst of a mass of nut foliage and fruit, the old carver had placed two or three squirrels and monkeys appreciating the feast spread out before them, and in the bordering of one of the windows we get some more squirrels cracking nuts with evident gusto. One of these we reproduce.